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Part 2 Honours Report

Understanding cultural differences between Australia and Indonesia. Observations made during a student exchange in Semester 2 1996.



During the last four years I have visited Indonesia a number of times; last year becoming involved in an exchange program with the Institute Kesenian Jakarta (Jakarta Institute of Art). During my visit I was given the opportunity to travel quite extensively through several areas of Indonesia. My interest in traditional Indonesian textiles led me to many remote regions where I began research into the technique of traditional back-strap weaving, as well as the history and the position of textiles in Indonesian society. Throughout my journey I observed many cultural intrusions and became aware of the countless areas of cultural misunderstanding that inevitably take place between the East and the West. It is these observations of cultural differences throughout my travels that have inspired me to write this paper.

Internationalism is the move away from national identity. It is an idea that at its best intentions aims to maintain a global community where all different cultures can communicate on one similar level, through one language. While proposing many benefits, the idea of this monoculture also threatens the diversity of cultures that are not strong enough to defy an influence as powerful as that of the developed world. Many smaller cultures have already been lost and many more are threatened.

Because we all live on one planet, at some point there does need to be a sense of international community, especially when making decisions about the world. A global community that speaks one language and can come together and speak about issues that affect the planet is a fantastic idea. The problem, as I see it, is that this convergence of cultures is not necessarily happening for the correct reasons (correct reasons being for the benefit of the planet rather monetary or political gain). Furthermore it is being based too strongly on Western values without a proper understanding of cultures such as Indonesia's which is the focus of my interest.

Art is one aspect of culture that can provide a lead to understanding different cultures. Creating art in any place is a response to an individual's environment. As artists, influences from our backgrounds are the obvious basis for all our ideas, whether we are conscious of this or not. Our ideas come from our influences. My upbringing and experiences have left me with different ideas to anyone else, new experiences are laid over the top of old ones and the result is different to another person's experience of the same situation. Similarly when introduced to a foreign country we need to keep the past experiences of its people in mind. As Caroline Turner points out European Australia has a comparatively small store of experience when compared to that of Indonesia.

One of the difficulties for us in Australia is reconciling our short historical memories with people whose memories comprehend an almost geological span of not hundreds but thousands of years.¹

In a broader context, Australia's relationship with Indonesia and other Asian countries has not really been based on a large amount of cultural understanding. There have been isolated examples of people such as Ian Fairweather who travelled extensively and felt connected to cultures that were very different. Fairweather spent time in Australian Aboriginal communities; he also travelled around South-east Asia and lived in China. Fairweather rejected his very traditional European upbringing and adopted many Chinese attitudes.

From the very beginning his 'image' of the Chinese was at variance with that of the majority of Europeans. "Everything about them, their customs, the personalities seemed to me worth absorbing".²

However, in wider Australia it has only been very recently that the importance of understanding a culture in order to create a successful relationship has become an issue. Why has it taken us so long to do this? Alison Broinowski argues that:

...from the first, only those...who were specially imaginative, disaffected or eccentric thought the chance of East-West fusion worth investigating...Politics...sided with history against geography...to the detriment of economics.³

The colonisation of Australia, by the English, has made cultures such as those in Indonesia seem different and difficult to relate to for Australians. Therefore, we have always looked to Europe and America as blueprints on which to base our society.

One key area of difference to Australia is religion and its role in all aspects, contemporary and traditional, of Indonesian society. In Indonesia, religion is an integral part of society. In many situations religion provides the basis for the way that villages are structured and the way daily activities are run.⁴ Islam is the main religion of Indonesia and the mosque is the centre of daily life. This applies not just in the very traditional areas away from urban centres. Religion is the one constant in Indonesia, it is probably the only thing that both the rich and the poor share. Even in the areas where the dominance of the developed, business world is most prominent prayer rooms and mosques are a very important part of life. There is a strong sense of community in Indonesia that is not apparent in the

¹ Turner, Caroline. Second Asia Pacific Triennial.

² Bail, Murray. Ian Fairweather, Bay Books, N.S.W 1989

³ Broinowski, Alison. The Yellow Lady, Foreword

⁴ This is seen through the many festivals and fasting periods, the devotion to prayer and the cleanliness that takes place before it and the restrictions on food.

culture I live in; this could be due to the ideas of Islam as well as part of life in a developing country.

While Christianity is present as the most popular form of worship in Australia devotion to religion is not as integral as it is in Indonesia. There is not the strong sense of religion in the broader community; Australian culture seems in many aspects to be much more directed towards the importance of the individual, individual success rather than that of a family or community group. In Australia religious events such as Christmas and Easter, funerals and weddings are occasions where large groups of people come together. Many people attend church in Sundays, however, for most Indonesians the mosque is visited three or more times a day, when they can't leave jobs to go to the mosque, time is still set aside for prayer.

Communication is another area of difference to Australia. Being able to verbalise ideas in Indonesian, or any different language, does not guarantee successful understanding; without a level of understanding of the culture. An example is that Indonesian is a passive language: it does not have words that can translate as hard "no", but there are words that imply negative responses. Although words can be understood, their meaning may not necessarily be obvious. An example is 'saya tidak lahir kemarin' which translates as 'I was not born yesterday'; although the words and the sentence can be understood literally the meaning the sentence would take on in my society would not be. The sentence would be taken completely literally. A lecture 'Interpreting Other Cultures' which I attended in May 1997 made clear that not everything translates correctly verbally even with fluent language skills. It dealt with simultaneous interpreting, illustrating the point that a knowledge of the culture is needed in order to obtain clear communication. The lecture used humour as an example and spoke about how even in humour a knowledge of the culture is necessary.⁵

In the same way that learning new technology in the West (for example, computer technology) demands a knowledge of the basis of the old, relating to cultures in Indonesia requires an amount of understanding of the ways of the culture. Not coming from this culture means complete understanding is not possible, however, at least a level of education and sensitivity towards the long and deeply rooted background and culture is necessary if we intend to develop an equal relationship. To understand aspects of the culture, such as the art, we need to acknowledge the beliefs by which that culture exists by. Caroline Turner points this out with respect to religion:

⁵ Lecture was held at Asian Studies Faculty, Australian National University. I have requested the lecturer's details.

...in many cases religion is absolutely integral to the individual artist's world view and shapes his or her art in ways which are incomprehensible without an understanding of spiritual beliefs.⁶

Understanding Indonesia's culture is laced with difficulties; being aware of where the differences lie opens up more difficult areas that need acknowledgment. Methods of communication are not approached the same way; I live in a society where the spoken word is the way of communication, however, learning by observation over time is another way that is more in line with cultures based on spiritual beliefs.

Historically there have been limits to our understanding of Indonesia which need to be overcome. Our early ideas were developed through other peoples' experiences throughout the Asia Pacific region. Journalistic novels over the past hundred years have painted a picture of the area for us, and then changed it as new knowledge through increased travel and cultural experience was learnt.

For years, many writers proclaimed that the people travelling or working in the Asian region were changed by their experiences. Foreigners arrived perhaps naive, a little ignorant but definitely with decent morals, and left slightly corrupted, having achieved "...a sort of enlightenment with the sadness of innocence and the immaturity lost and experience gained."⁷ As Alison Broinowski has argued, foreigners were often saviours of locals. In Dewi Anggraeni's 'The Root of all Evil', the character Komala, was Indonesian born and married to a Melbourne doctor. She returns to Jakarta to see her dying father. Her family is shocked by the changes life in Australia has brought to her and she is equally shocked by the exploitation of women and servants. She attempts to save a bar hostess who is the target of an acid attack from a jealous wife of a wealthy man.⁸ These ideas of course differed depending upon which angle the novel was coming from; whether writers were from Asian or Australian backgrounds.

Australians were written about as superficial people; viewing themselves as superior while, in the novels, the opposite was true. Australian women were often viewed as sexually promiscuous, while men were seen as either '...violent or threatening, or as unattractive wimps'.⁹ Therefore we see two interpretations of Australian culture. Within Australian society when reflecting on Asian culture we see similar traits of characters being portrayed.

⁶ Turner, Caroline. Second Asia Pacific Triennial.

⁷ Broinowski, Alison. The Yellow Lady, pg 186

⁸ see Broinowski, Alison. The Yellow Lady, pg 193-194

⁹ Broinowski, Alison. The Yellow Lady, pg 194

These limited ideas became the basis for our understanding of the region and were based on a small number of peoples' experience and therefore provided a very narrow and superficial view of a large and diverse area.

Changes came in the West around the late sixties with the introduction of genderless clothing and feminism, birth control pills, hallucinogenic and addictive drugs. All these developments impacted greatly on travel and as a result attitudes towards it became freer, especially for women who were no longer seen as longing for commitment. The days of "...the dependency roles and agonising over pregnancy and contraception...."¹⁰ were gone. As a result more people travelled, developing better understandings of Asia through first-hand experience.

Australia is a very well travelled country with a huge multi-cultural society. A large proportion of Australians travel each year for business and pleasure. Many young Australians leave school to spend months seeing other parts of the world. Most Australians, if not experienced travellers, are at least aware of the opportunities. Two and a half million journeys abroad were undertaken in 1995, an enormous number for a population of 18 million.¹¹

However, in areas of Indonesia it is common for people to have never left the district in which they were born. In one incident on my travels there I became fully aware of the differences between our cultures: this was where I realised that even speaking a common language didn't necessarily help. I asked Neti, a girl of my age living in a village in Eastern Flores if she had ever been to Jakarta. When "No" was the answer I brought the question gradually closer by island, Java....Bali..... I stopped at Lombok discovering that she had not yet been to the opposite end of her island let alone crossed water.

This was the start of many revelations for me of the massive cultural differences. When I look at my options I picture the globe, for someone like Neti her area holds everything. The travel that I see would appear terrifying to her. The expansive travel that I see open to me would be something Neti could not imagine. Her situation is that her father died when she was five and as the only daughter her role from that day has been to be beside her mother. She is aware that there is more out there but has never left her region and she did not seem interested in the idea.

Where Neti lives there are no electricity or telephone lines so she has not been exposed to the American television that is broadcast in Indonesia. Neti would not be able to comprehend the expansiveness of the world outside her village, she

¹⁰ Broinowski, Alison. *The Yellow Lady*, pg 186

¹¹ Ewington, Julie. 'A Contemporary Prospectus for Pilgrimage', *Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian Interactions*

wouldn't be scared because she wouldn't know what to be scared of. This area of Flores was the most traditional, basic and untouched by the west part of Indonesia that I visited.

Australia's relationship with Indonesia is primarily trade driven; through this we are becoming more aware that the cultural differences between Australia and Indonesia are not just specific to travel. Through increased business interactions with Indonesia Australia is becoming increasingly open to learning about the way that the culture of this country operates. Pat HOFFIE, a Scottish-born, Brisbane-based artist, works with the problems of the cultural milieu that she exists within and with the effect of "...the large upon the small - the shenanigans of the superpowers, the mighty, the wealthy are exposed as they interface with smaller, less powerful communities and the individual."¹² Recent work of HOFFIE's exhibited in 'Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian Interactions' contained the words 'transnationally speaking....cultural exchange is the lubricant for economic intercourse'.¹³

Australians doing business in Indonesia are now often provided with a brief introducing the country, the history, religion and other obvious differences between our cultures and areas where particular cultural sensitivity needs to be exercised. One very important difference between our cultures is the emphasis placed on personal relationships in Indonesia. In Australia and in the West the relationship between two business parties is not of paramount importance, business can go ahead quite easily without a friendship. In Indonesia the personal relationship is very important and business could easily not happen if this relationship were not developed. In Australia business culture is based on 'time is money'; this is not the case in Indonesia.¹⁴

The Indonesian concept of time remains very different to the Australian. In Australia I live by the clock. I take for granted that if I ask a question about when something happened the answer would use the minute, hour, day, week, month, year plan that our idea of time is based on. But I have become aware of other perceptions of time, for example, through a conversation with Veronica Pereira Maia. She is a weaver who is part of an show 'Reclaiming the Earth', an exhibition that began four years ago in Darwin. Her work is a series of weavings created on a back-strap loom (a traditional loom used throughout Indonesia, see

¹² Williamson, Clare & Snelling, Michael. 'Austral/Asian Interactions' Above and Beyond

¹³ Williamson, Clare & Snelling, Michael. 'Austral/Asian Interactions' Above and Beyond

¹⁴ Business lunches and other similar relationship building social events are an important part of potential business interactions. Where an Australian business person may become disgruntled when an appointment is planned and the person does not arrive, and casually wants to reschedule the meeting this would be detrimental to the transaction desired. [reference: an SBS programme on expatriate experiences in SEA] The issue of punctuality is now becoming more important in contemporary Indonesian business life, however, not yet with the vigour experienced in Australia.



Weavings by Veronica Pereira Maia. Part of 'Reclaiming the Earth'. (top) ikat weaving containing names of the victims of the Dili massacre. (bottom) basket, tank imagery.

technical report). Her work is a memorial to the victims of the Dili massacre in November 1991.

In an interview with Veronica I asked when she was last in Timor. A long discussion followed teaching me that time was judged by what had happened since an event. For Veronica to tell me when she was last in Timor it was established by what had happened since she was there, or what was happening at the time she was there. No specifics could be reached in terms of months, years or dates and I realised how it really was an unimportant question. The idea of needing to know when and for how long, to put everything in a place and give it a name and explanation is very Western. While on exchange in Jakarta I experienced countless frustrations when making appointments to speak to people and them not turning up, I needed to get used to the casual way that things are often undertaken; there is not the rush that there often is here in Australia.

Educating people about differences such as these is important for successful interaction in business; but also to the more important development of an equal relationship between the two countries. It is difficult to realise that there are aspects of our society, such as concepts of time and business, which we take for granted that appear to be completely foreign to a developing country such as Indonesia.

Our societies are run so differently, historically based on very different ideas. It would not be equally difficult for Indonesia to relate to white Australian society, as our society is quite new and deep spiritual ideas have not influenced our development. From both sides there is not the opportunity to become immersed in the culture from the start.

These cultural differences make it hard to relate with full understanding to the art that comes from the country. Political issues, social criticism, identity searches can be identified but I have found that real understanding of these issues is very difficult. In order to view the work fairly I found that I needed to be open to learn from it. Looking at art created from within a different culture I needed to identify what I didn't know and what I didn't understand about that place and therefore learn from their work. Without recognition that this work has come from artists living in an environment completely foreign to my own; by people from a country with so many differences I am not being fair to the work. We should look at work from cultures such as Indonesia's as being able to teach us or give us some insight into the culture, the environment and situation of being part of and living in that culture in that country. Not to expect the work to answer all our questions.

Indonesia has many different traditional arts, each island has either different techniques or variations of techniques. Many people think of the traditional ikat and batik cloths, wood carving, hand built pots when they think of the arts from Indonesia. When I first arrived on exchange at the Institute Kesenian Jakarta (Jakarta Institute of Art) this was what I thought I would see, students working with the traditional techniques to make their statements. What I had wanted was clear answers to what Indonesian art was and what I found was an art school and society which seemed to me to have more unanswered questions about their situation than I did. Artists' world-wide search for identity, for ways to represent their messages and their ideas. Indonesia is not an exception, however, it seemed very evident and difficult. Indonesia seemed to be in a confusing situation; in the centre of a huge contradiction; the east and the west; traditional and contemporary.

I was faced with more questions and more challenges. It must be difficult to form an identity with the number of episodes of colonialism that Indonesia has been exposed to; I can only imagine how difficult it must be to form an identity. I realised that my need to have clear answers about what was Indonesia and who were the Indonesian people was again very Western.

In the art school I was expecting to see art produced using the traditional methods, that I had read about, in a contemporary way. Work reflecting the situation and environment the students were in at that time. And perhaps even less contemporary than that; I was expecting to see fabrics woven in a traditional way. I guess that my interest and respect for the textiles of the area had put Indonesia on a pedestal, and I expected even in contemporary Indonesia to find people weaving and carving to preserve tradition.

Looking at works by current Indonesian artists I found many common themes addressed. After many years of Dutch colonisation, followed by constant visitation by traders and then the spotlight on Indonesia by the West, it is no surprise that a search for identity was what was obvious to me.

The work of Dede Erie Supria has summed up my ideas. In an exhibition consisting of 15 paintings, the content seems to be quite ironic considering the work is placed in the Jakarta Stock Exchange building. All his paintings are very realistic and socially critical. One for example "Labyrinth" shows two young boys on the bottom right hand edge of the canvas standing on a platform. Obviously poor children from a village, they are looking confused and worried at a plastic shopping bag that is spilling out cardboard boxes into a labyrinth that goes on forever. The children representing the main population of Indonesia have no understanding of this maze of development they find before them and no way of making their way through it. The maze is representative of the current



Dede Eri Supria, 'In the concrete jungle' (from 'Concrete forest' series) 1991, oil on canvas, 120x140cm. Painting shown as part of the First Asia Pacific Triennial.

position of their country. In his painting the children are alone; not understanding and with no one to guide them.

Another painting shows a woman sitting on a park bench with a flat expanse of land blending into the ocean in front of her. She is turning to face the viewer and a chicken wire fence covers half of her. The subject is looking behind her longingly to a past that she understood. The development and modernisation that reveals itself in a flat endless expanse that holds nothing for people like her. The confusion and uncertainty created by the pressure of the West seems inescapable.

Supria was commissioned to do a painting for the fifth anniversary of the Jakarta Stock Exchange. It seems an unusual decision to choose an artist who dealt obviously with the negative effects that institutions such as these left on people. In an article published in the Jakarta Post Supria commented on the content of the commissioned painting:

Perhaps it has to do with globalization, the influences of culture from outside Indonesia, the influences to globalization, and, even more so, the influences of the free world market of the year 2000-something. In art, it provides the opportunity for foreign artists to enter the Indonesian market. If we are negligent, we may lose.

The image of the parabola clearly seems to symbolise the "broadcasting" of globalization. "When we watch *lenong* (traditional Betawi play) on television, it is very different today. It seems that there is a lot which has been cut away. Perhaps it is also because of these influences that we never know what will happen later on. There are so many foreign companies and cultures entering and crowding us.¹⁵

Through Supria's paintings I am made aware of the terrifying issues he is working with, the work is extremely successful in illustrating the hopeless situation that ordinary people are being forced into. The subjects of his work have done nothing to be put in these positions where there is no help for them, they are not invited to join the development, despite the fact that it is unlikely that they would want to. The main population of Indonesia would not understand or want to be part of the superficiality of the Western influence in their country.

Supria's work left me very saddened by the impossibility of the situation many Indonesian people have been placed in. I cannot completely understand the situation, having never had to experience feelings of such helplessness; of being left behind as my environment grew up around me into something I didn't understand and was not part of. However, although I was aware of this aspect of Indonesia before I viewed Supria's work he has managed to cross many cultural barriers in a way that verbal communication could not to bring me a very definite feeling of understanding of the situation.

¹⁵ Sidharta, Amir. The Jakarta Post; July 18, 1997; 'Art/Design, Painter Dede Erie Supria gets down to business'

Following on from my experiences of Supria's work I have become interested in the cross-cultural aspects of work through other artists. These include Peter Atkins, an Australian artist working from his travel experience; and 'Fire and Life'; a collaborative project between Australia and India to show the benefits that can come from cross-cultural interactions.

Peter Atkins has travelled extensively and produced work from his experiences. In 1990 he exhibited 'United States Journal', which consisted of twelve panels representing each one of the cities he visited. 'World Journal' was exhibited in Jakarta in 1994, this was produced after forty weeks of travel through Bangkok, Amsterdam, London, Dublin, New York and through India, Turkey, and Central and South America. 'World Journal' came from Atkins' journals and small drawings that were made during his travels. It is made up of 40 canvases of mixed media; Atkins has used patterns, text, icons, objects he has found or collected. Each of the pieces seem to contain things that the artist saw and enjoyed, experiences that he had and ideas that he thought about. Each canvas has the name of a town and a date, this notation being the only evidence of travel.

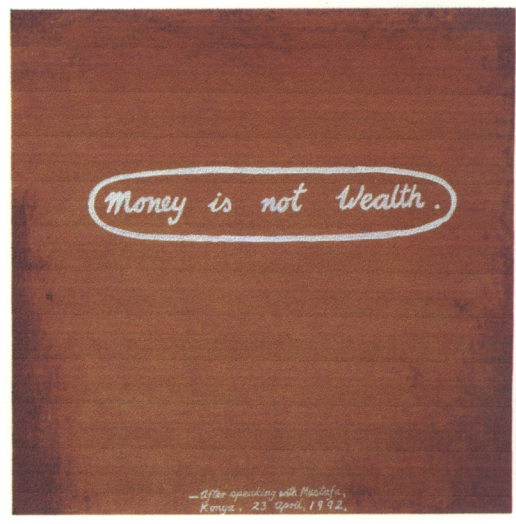
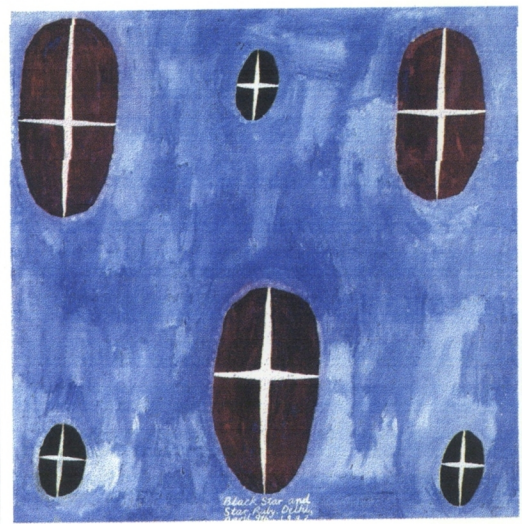
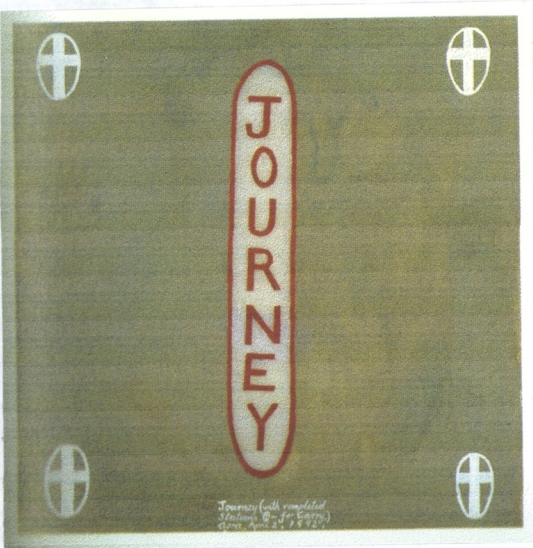
Peter Atkins records of his travels are not narratives in any traditional sense because they leave out the very business of travelling. For the modern traveller, there is no longer any sense of continuity, any sense that the journeying itself is part of the experience. The trip begins not at the time of departure but at the point of arrival.¹⁶

The artist has identified what he hopes to gain from his experience is an understanding of himself, of his culture by having the opportunity to see himself more clearly through a foreign window. The images in each canvas are not culturally specific; the artist has not attempted cultural assimilation, the work becomes a very personal sketch book of one person's experience.

'Fire and Life' was a project where five artists from five Australian cities were matched with five artists from five Indian cities. Each artist from Australia spent time living and making art in their Indian partners city and vice versa. The work produced by the pair of artists from each city was then exhibited in that city resulting in ten exhibitions over 1996 and 1997. I saw three parts involving six artists from the project; the Canberra/Delhi pairing of David Jenz and N.N.Rimzon, the Sydney/Bangalore pairing of Joan Grounds and N.S. Harsha and the Brisbane/Calcutta pairing of Judith Wright and Jayashree Chakravarty.

'Fire and Life' was not "...concerned with exporting cultural product but with a long term investment in people. The secret to resonant success of this venture is its unquestioning emphasis

¹⁶ Timms, Peter. "Discovering What is Already Familiar", Peter Atkins 'World Journal'



Peter Atkins 'World Journal', (from top left clockwise)
 'Journey (with Completed Stations - for Garry)' Agra, India. 2 April 1992
 'Black Star and Star Ruby' Delhi, India. 9 April 1992
 'Simple Kilim Pattern' Ankara, Turkey. 21 April 1992
 'Money is not Wealth - After Speaking with Mustafa' Konya, Turkey. 23 April 1992

on the personal." ¹⁷ The artists develop relationships and experience the different cities and cultures with a person comfortable and at home in the environment, they are introduced to the culture and the way of life in the most accurate manner possible. This way the participants are receiving a very realistic impression of a city so different from their own.

The meeting point seen in collaborations like 'Fire and Life' is where success lies. The project is not about creating a monoculture. These collaborations are about learning, about the value of being exposed to a different culture. They rest on a mutual interest in understanding and maintaining cultural diversity. I see this as the most prosperous way of experiencing and learning from a different culture. My thoughts after my period of travel, the art that I observed in Indonesia and generally what I learnt from this cross-cultural experience have been confirmed by Peter Timms in writing on Peter Atkins's work.

When we travel we are necessarily reduced to seeing what has already been seen, to recording what has been endlessly recorded. We deliberately seek out the most often sought-out icons and we photograph for ourselves what has been photographed so often....It is our way of reaffirming our ordinariness, our place in the broader scheme of things. It represents our desperate need to belong.

And what can we aspire to return home with? Not certainly, with any startling new revelation which might add to the store of human knowledge.....Most of us....if we are at all alive to the potentialities of cultural interactions, would expect to arrive home not with new facts to impart but.....with new personal understandings: of other peoples and other cultures.....but, perhaps more to the point, of ourselves and our responses.¹⁸

¹⁷ Devenport, Rhana. '...from Calcutta to Brisbane... ...from home to home...' Eyeline, No. 34 Spring 1997

¹⁸ Timms, Peter. 'Discovering What is Already Familiar', Peter Atkins 'World Journal'

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